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Marines eye new Molokai training site

With the lease at Kalama Ula expiring, an area near Ilio Point is under study

BY GREGG K. KAKESAKO
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The Marines are considering nearly 9,000 acres on the northwestern end of Molokai near Ilio Point as a new training ground.

Lt. Col. D'Arcy Grisler, Kaneohe Marine Corps Base operations officer, said the military's 10-year lease with the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands at Kalama Ula will expire next year, and the Corps is starting an environmental assessment of the Molokai

Ranch acreage as a replacement. Capt. John Milliman, Kaneohe spokesman, said \$11 million was recently approved by Congress for the environmental study.

"The best-case scenario would be to shut down one range next year and switch to the other one at the same time," Milliman said.

Grisler said this is the third time the Marine Corps has tried to find additional training areas in Hawaii. Attempts in 1985 and in 1988 were unsuccessful because of the long lead time required for environmental documentation and lack of funding.

The Marines now lease 6,700 acres of Hawaiian Homestead land west of Kaunakakai to train. The military is paying the state

about \$25,000 a year.

Because of noise complaints, night helicopter operations were halted in September 1993.

Even after the night helicopter operations ended, "it was the community sentiment that the Marines should find some other site," said Kenneth Toguchi, DHHL spokesman.

In a telephone interview, Gregory Helm, DHHL Molokai supervisor, said the situation had become critical when he got there six years ago.

"It was tough," Helm said. "There were helicopters flying overhead three or four at a time. Not only were pilots flying low, there were operations that used to begin at 4 in the morning."

It was not only the aircraft noise, Helm said, but the increased demand for subdivisions. The training area — where about 61 families live — may revert to a community pasture, he said.

"Some of the homesteaders have gotten together and plan to raise cattle there," Helm said. Milliman said Marine helicopters are now used only to shuttle troops to the island.

Only maneuver-style training is conducted on Molokai, which Milliman describes as operations that do not involve firing of live ammunition or the use of heavy tracked vehicles and amphibious assaults.

"That's what makes Bellows (Air Station in Waimanalo beach) so critical to the Marine Corps," Milli-

man said. "That's the only place here where we can conduct amphibious training."

Besides Molokai and Waimanalo beach, Hawaii Marines now train at Barking Sands on Kauai, Pohakuloa on the Big Island and Schofield on Oahu.

"Competition for scheduling, distance to areas, along with proximity to urban and resort areas, increase the difficulty in maintaining high levels of readiness ...," Grisler said.

Although the Marines use the Molokai range only about 100 days a year, Milliman said, "the best aspect of Molokai is its proximity to Oahu. We would continue to have an area that we don't have to compete for use with the Army."